

MARIEN CORPS GAZETTE ARTICLE # 2, COMMANDER'S INTENT: EASY TO UNDERSTAND, TOUGH TO ARTICULATE

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 5, *Planning*, states that “the commander is probably the single most important factor in effective planning.” The central role of the commander in planning is also doctrinally codified in Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 5-1, *Marine Corps Planning Process*. The commander draws on his experience to visualize the relationship between friendly forces, enemy forces, and the battlespace. The commander envisions the interaction of these elements over time and how he will achieve a decision that leads to the desired end state. He initiates planning by communicating this vision through the most important element of the commander's battlespace area evaluation (CBAE) - the commander's intent.

MCWP 5-1 discusses CBAE in detail. This article focuses on the commander's intent and the difficulties that MSTP has observed in commanders crafting this critical element that drives planning and provides the implicit communications necessary to execute our warfighting doctrine of maneuver warfare.

According to MCDP 1, *Warfighting*, the purpose of a commander's intent is “to allow subordinates to exercise judgment and initiative—to depart from the original plan when the unforeseen occurs—in a way that is consistent with higher commanders' aims.” As Marines, we have long recognized the importance of commander's intent in execution. We have not always been as effective, however, in applying commander's intent in planning.

MCWP 5-1 defines commander's intent as “the commander's personal expression of the purpose of the operation. It must be clear, concise, and easily understood. It may also include how a commander envisions achieving a decision as well as the conditions that, when satisfied, accomplish the purpose.”

The following are some common observations and potential solutions that may assist commanders in the communication of their intent:

- **The Intent is Too Wordy or Lacks Focus.** When a commander develops an intent that is several pages long, it is difficult to discern the intent (i.e., purpose). If the commander's intent is to be of value to the planners, it must be clear, concise, and easily understood. It may also include how the commander envisions achieving a decision (i.e., method) as well as the conditions that, when satisfied, accomplish the purpose of the operation (i.e., end state). Commander's intent expressed in terms of “*purpose – method –end state*” is more easily understood and facilitates planning. This format is not only being used in the Marine Corps, but it is also widely used in joint operations.
- **The Intent Focuses on the “How” or “What” Vice the “Why”.** Often commander's intent mistakenly focuses on defining what must be done (the task) and how it should be accomplished. In these cases, intent takes on the form of initial guidance. The commander's initial guidance should provide the battle staff and subordinate commanders with his view of what his force is to do and the resources he will need to accomplish the mission. The initial guidance may be based on the six warfighting functions and/or how the commander envisions the sequence of actions that will cause his force to arrive at the desired end state. Subsequent guidance may also provide preliminary decisions to focus planners on the commander's conceptual vision of the operation. For example, the commander may issue guidance on phasing, forms of maneuver, or task organization. Whereas guidance may be comprehensive and detailed in nature and is aimed at planners, commander's intent is intended for both the planners and the executors. Commander's intent focuses on the enduring portion of any mission by clearly stating the purpose (the “why”), which will continue to guide our actions in execution while the “how” or “what” (tasks) may change as the situation develops. As the commander proceeds through planning and his situational awareness grows, he may refine his intent by describing how he envisions achieving a decision (method) and reaching a desired end state.

- **The Commander does not Always Write the Commander's Intent.** Many times the commander's intent is not the commander's personal expression of the purpose of the operation. This personal expression of purpose drives the planning process and ensures unity of effort in execution. As such, its development should not be left solely to the staff. The commander may direct his staff to provide a recommended intent for his review, but the final product must reflect his own vision of the purpose of the operation. Field-Marshal Viscount W. J. Slim, British defender of India and liberator of Burma in WW II, says of the commander's intent: "It is the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander and soldier in the army must be dominated, it should, therefore, be worded by the commander himself."¹
- **The Terminology used to Describe Commander's Intent is Inconsistent or Confusing.** To make the commander's intent clear and concise, it is critical that the commander uses precise military terminology. By using accepted doctrinal terms to express key points, his subordinates focus on those things that are critical to mission accomplishment, saving time, and allocating the appropriate forces and resources. Correct terminology aids subordinates in understanding the commander's intent by reducing confusion through the use of a common vocabulary. Additionally, the commander can add clarity to his intent by explaining the terms he uses (i.e., "By defeat I mean ...").

Issued as an element of CBAE during commander's orientation, the commander's intent is critical to the planning process and in subsequent mission execution. A clear, concise and easily understood intent focuses the staff and serves as a basis for consistency and continuity in developing a concept of operations, allocating resources, and making other planning decisions. An effective technique for expressing commander's intent is the purpose—method—end state format. Using this format, a commander can issue and refine his intent ensuring that subordinates understand the purpose of the operation, how he envisions achieving a decision, and what conditions must be met to achieve the purpose. Properly issued and applied, the commander's intent will lead to unity of effort throughout planning and execution.

¹ *Defeat into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (p. 211) by Field Marshal Viscount William Joseph Slim, Cooper Square Press, copyright 2000